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ABSTRACT

The examination of ethical implications as part of intercultural communications courses and the responsibility of the instructor of these courses are discussed. Two questions are considered: Should ethics as a topic be included in courses in intercultural communications? What common problems in intercultural communication education could be in violation of ethical principles? Since class discussions always include the existence of differing perceptions, values, assumptions, and communication styles, the subject matter makes ethics hard to ignore. Also, there is the need to bring attention to reliance on written and unwritten codes in one's culture and to consider theories of ethical relativism and ethical universalism. Finally, the topic of ethics should consider the possibility of misuse and abuse of certain cultural information and skills and the responsibility that goes along with learning a new language and culture. The second question involves six classroom practices which should be scrutinized: using teaching maxims as if they were valid for all cultures; disseminating information about cultures without adding cautions to check reliability due to possibilities of change and individual differences; failing to discuss the ethics of misusing cultural information; enforcing one's own behavior and learning style in an ethnocentric manner; using a double standard of grading; and failing to recognize and/or help students work through an identity crisis. (Author/KC)

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ETHICS AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION EDUCATION

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A consideration of ethics has always been important in the field of communication. It seems especially vital and challenging in the special area of intercultural communication education. The intent of this paper is not to survey the literature on ethics or choose from among the many definitions and approaches to this subject. It is simply to focus on classroom aspects and stimulate thought and reaction from educators in the intercultural field. Those interested in the various ethical theories are encouraged to peruse the library shelf.[1] Two major questions will be discussed here: (1) Should ethics as a topic be included in courses in intercultural communication? and (2) What common practices in intercultural communication education could be in violation of ethical principles as we might define them? Possible alternatives for present practices will be suggested.

Ethics as subject matter has long been included in the teaching of communication skills. Quintilian, a Roman citizen of the first century, A.D., defined effective speech as "a good man speaking well," as well as stating that "the orator must above all things study morality . . ."[2] Ethos, the Greek word for "character," was declared by Aristotle to be necessary for rhetorical greatness. Although ethos and ethics are not necessarily synonymous concepts[3] the two were related and important at that time. Then, as now, personal qualities such as trustworthiness, honesty and concern for the audience were being applauded.

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[1]See, for example, H. J. McCloskey, META-ETHICS AND NORMATIVE ETHICS (Martinus Nijhoff/The Hague, 1969 and William K. Frankena, ETHICS (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963).

[2]INSTITUTES OF ORATORY, trans. John Selby Watson (London: H.G. Bohn, 1856) (XII, ii, 1) II, p. 402.

[3]Richard L. Johannesen, ETHICS IN HUMAN COMMUNICATION (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1975), p. 70.

In modern classrooms such topics as a communicator's responsibility to do careful research, test evidence, analyze information sources, report accurately, and not present "opinion" as "fact" are stressed with little disagreement as to their appropriateness. Obviously, these represent U.S. values. Questions about the ethics of learning and using persuasive techniques create a more lively debate since perceptions will differ as to which acts of persuasion are ethical and whether the "ends justify the means."[4] What is important, however, is the discussion itself which stimulates thinking among the students even though no general conclusions are reached.

Basic communication courses often include topics such as the ethics of prevention of interaction (through censure of prejudice, gay rights, intermarriage, for example), the ethics of ghost writing (plagiarism) or the ethics of censorship. One communication text states, "Every communication act has consequences, whether for one person or for an entire culture, and, therefore, has an ethical dimension, a rightness and a wrongness dimension."[5] The implications of this sentence for a class in intercultural communication are unending.

Precedence for the inclusion of ethics as a classroom topic certainly exists, but there are special reasons for presenting it to persons studying intercultural communication. In the first place, the subject matter of the course makes ethics hard to ignore. Whether or not an instructor takes a "culture general" or a "culture specific" approach, he or she is certain to include a discussion of the existence of differing perceptions, values, beliefs, assumptions and communication styles among cultures. Questions about the difficulty and desirability of deciding which set is "right" and what happens when they conflict are bound to follow.

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[4]For a discussion of the topic of the ethics of persuasion see Richard L. Johannesen, ETHICS AND PERSUASION: Selected Readings (N.Y.: Random House, 1967).

[5]Joseph A. DeVito, COMMUNICOLOGY: An Introduction to the Study of Communication (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 94.

Secondly, intrinsic to any course is the need to bring to attention the reliance everyone has on the written and unwritten codes of his or her own culture and how this makes it possible to move appropriately and predict the responses of others. Since these codes differ, "mistakes" are bound to occur under conditions of intercultural communication, including deviance from the prevailing value system. This could be labeled wrong, immoral or unethical depending on one's definition and the seriousness of the act. Aristotle insisted that evil intent is an essential condition for an immoral act, but he also felt ignorance was culpable if it resulted from carelessness or a refusal to investigate what an agent is expected to know.[6]

A third topic usually discussed in the intercultural communication classroom is ethnocentrism. This also includes a judgmental factor and leads easily, and almost inevitably, into the subject of ethics. Students ask, "Is it ethical to impose one's own set of values on another?" "Doesn't it make a difference if the salesman, innovator, doctor or whomever is convinced that it's for the others' good?" "What about the missionary whose own set of standards includes the mandate to persuade others to his values and beliefs?" "When traveling, should someone 'do in Rome what the Romans do' even if that behavior seems wrong to the newcomer?" "Aren't there some universal laws of good and evil?" "Where is the fine line that separates President Carter's Human Rights persuasions from being an intrusion (and therefore unethical) and a humanitarian intervention?" Questions such as these capture student interest, but, more important, they provide the opportunity to present the theories of ethical relativism and ethical universalism. This is an easy and important attachment to the theories of objective and subjective reality and cultural relativism which usually occur early in a course.

Case studies are useful to introduce questions of ethics. Any educator

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[6]Johannesen, ETHICS AND PERSUASION, p. 117.

experienced in this field would have a ready supply. One in which I was called in as mediator illustrates injustice due to ignorance and ethnocentric reasoning. It also brings up the question as to how serious the disturbance must be to someone before it can be called unethical instead of inappropriate. A math instructor in the U.S. asked students to correct their own papers in class and record the number of problems missed on the paper before turning it in. An Iranian student put a "zero" on his paper which indicated none were missed. The instructor discovered several incorrect answers when looking over the paper. During the next class period the instructor asked who the person was and accused him of cheating, an act the instructor called unethical. The Iranian was humiliated and felt the instructor was the one who had been unethical, not only because he had embarrassed him in public by questioning his honesty but because the student believed he was innocent. It was discovered that the student had interpreted the word "missed" to mean "overlooked." Since he had answered every question even though not all were correct he could not be convinced he had "missed" any.

Questions can also be raised in the intercultural communication classroom under the topic of ethics about the propriety of researching and learning information about another culture's values, customs, communication systems and life style with the idea of using it to further one's own ambitions without thought as to the effect on the other. To blunder about in a foreign country may not be very satisfying to either the visitor or the host national but at least the newcomer stays in the spotlight where he can't get "into mischief" and his mistakes are usually politely tolerated.

One of the goals of the educator may be to help students minimize the possibilities of intercultural "blunders" and make better communication possible. In so doing, however, he or she may be helping the selfish and unscrupulous find areas of vulnerability in specific cultures, ways to maneuver, persuade, "use" the new culture to an unfair advantage. There are many examples of this: all the way from

feigning ignorance to get special help to making a host national feel obligated or indebted so as to extract favors. Some use the other culture's special values or needs to sell a product or ideology that may not be in the other's total or best interests. This also works the other way. It might be the visitor who finds himself "taken." Travelers and international student advisors can usually tell many unpleasant stories about persons who were cheated or abused by unethical individuals who capitalized on a "weakness."

Obviously a classroom cannot be screened or purged of potential abusers of information and skills, but the possibility of this misuse interculturally can at least be discussed under the topic of ethics. Charlatans exist within cultures, of course, but their potential victims have the advantage of being culturally aware of the usual signs and methods of trickery. They can move away from the solicitor who does not have credentials, recognize a "bargain" that is not a bargain, read the nonverbal signs that spell danger, etc. A foreigner can be more easily duped, especially when the persuader knows something about the other's culture. For example, some Westerners are likely to be confused and easily outwitted by the bargaining styles of some other cultures: some Easterners have been taught to put the wishes of guests first or avoid a public confrontation at all costs and, therefore, be led to perform actions to their disadvantage or indulge a foreign provoker.

Many travelers learn just enough of the new language and culture to be able to form alliances with the people and "use the system" without realizing the responsibility that goes along with this. This is a normal step in the learning process but, too often, the cultural intruder stops there, reaping the rewards but not paying the price. An historic example of this is the patron-peon system in early Mexico which worked well in the total fabric of the rugged, isolated southwest. The pattern didn't cease when loyalty was transferred to Anglos who worked within their own structure and values, which did not include the benevolence of

the early patrons. By clinging to their inherent values, Hispano-Americans became vulnerable to exploitation from a culture whose value system differed. Instructors can aid students acquire an ethical sense which should include the wisdom to respond with appropriate reciprocal behaviors when receiving benefits within a new culture.

Many other questions could be listed under the general heading of ethics as a topic, but two more will suffice. What ethical principles can be called on when there is a clash of values and beliefs? An example is the ski resort operator who wants to enlarge his ski runs on property in the mountains of Arizona in spite of the remonstrances of the Hopi Indians who believe this is the home of their deities. The other question is, how much information can be disseminated about a culture without inviting invasion and perhaps unwanted change?

The second major area of concern in this paper is: What common practices in an intercultural communication classroom might be in violation of our own ethical code? This is in no sense accusatory, simply a search for possibilities.

One practice is the free use of theoretical orientations that actually may be culture-bound and therefore relative. This is particularly true of the axioms in social science, many of which have been generated from research done through the perceptions and set of assumptions of the researchers, even if cross-cultural data is used.[7]

A second practice is the disseminating of culture-specific information. Are probability terms and qualifications always included? Is the information unbiased and taken from the culture's mainstream? Is the use of stereotypes avoided? Is an instructor cautious not to generalize from his or her own limited experience? Most are careful to stress that there are individual differences within every culture, and that nothing is certain. It's also important to talk in terms of patterns, trends,

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[7]For a discussion of this issue see Amarjit Singh, "The New World Order and the Globalization of Social Science: Some Implications for Teaching Cross-Culturally," in Topics in Culture Learning, Vol. 5, 1977 (Honolulu: East-West Center).

and dominant traits. If not unethical, it is at least misleading to make firm pronouncements about the life styles of specific cultures.

A third area in question is in two parts. The first part is: might there be inadvertent classroom discrimination against those of different backgrounds, not because of prejudice, but due to misinterpreting behaviors of nonverbal signs? Examples are the teacher who punishes a Filipino or American Indian child for not "looking her in the eye," or fails the student with a different time sense who misses classes and turns in late assignments or none at all unless reminded several times. It could include misinterpreting the walk and different mannerisms of blacks and others as intending to show insolence. It definitely includes being upset by the "bargaining-type" actions of some students who have learned since birth that living by their wits was necessary for survival. Hopefully, those teaching intercultural communication are on the lookout for cultural and individual variations such as the ones described above, and are much less likely to act in an enthnocentric manner than instructors who are uninitiated and just happen to have a few students in their classrooms from other cultures. The former, being aware of the possibility of different interpretations, are likely to check assumptions and not evaluate or act without consideration.

The second part of this area is even more troublesome. Is it ethical for instructors to enforce their own classroom standards and specific learning behaviors on students who find them alien and difficult? The examples are many; they include the professor who fails a Middle East student because he helped a friend during a test or lowers the grade of a Japanese for not participating in class discussion. It includes the ones who expect clarity and a linear reasoning style and are, therefore, impatient with ambiguity, spoken or written, and term papers that are not organized "correctly." This same person would probably expect creativity and the ability to critique theories presented in class; but these are not the

patterns of thinking of every culture. Another example is the public speaking instructor who insists that a student from a particular country stop pounding the podium and speaking in such an "artificial and arrogant" manner in spite of the student's remonstrances that that is proper for a public speaker in his country.

The reaction to the suggestion that an instructor must do some bending and accommodate to these different student expectations and behaviors, rather than enforcing his or her own standards, is usually adverse. The argument is that the students have elected to come to a foreign country to study and learn new ways (some ethnic minorities even find U.S. classrooms "foreign territory") and they should be the ones to adapt. If these are the behaviors the students have come to learn, they themselves agree, otherwise they are confused, frustrated and sometimes go home defeated.

Another reaction to the above suggestion is realistic but more positive. It is that, yes, students must adapt to whatever different learning style is in operation since they will not find many instructors adapting to them. If they are to succeed in the educational system they must try to meet the new expectations. A wise instructor will realize, however, that students as well as instructors are encapsulated by their own cultural ways. The students often do not know what is expected, only that they are "wrong." What they need is someone to recognize their difficulties and help them adjust. Most of all they need to feel that their own behaviors and methods are recognized as being legitimate, just not appropriate at that time and place.

The ethical principle involved is that too many instructors are accusatory or assume that the international or ethnic student "knows better" and is just not using his or her skills. Others may succeed in convincing the student that the new set of behaviors is better than the old set, which could jeopordize the student's adjustment upon re-entry to his own country. None of the instructors are acting maliciously, only ethnocentrically. This may not fall under the definition of non-ethical behavior, but the hurt to the student is there no matter how the action is labeled.

The intercultural communication instructor can help lessen this problem by taking responsibility for educating the professors as well as the students. Workshops have been held at Portland State University for this purpose with fair success. In one of these, professors and Arab students shared their frustrations with each other and, by so doing, enlarged perceptions. The professors complained that Arab students cheated on exams and did not write their own term papers. The Arab students at the workshop insisted that "cheating" was not allowed in their countries either but that their teachers understood the obligation that friends had for each other. They expressed sorrow for the U.S. students who "don't care about their friends," a conclusion reached because they saw little evidence of the U.S. students helping each other get better grades. Arab students reported that test situations were monitored very carefully in their countries so there would be no opportunity to share information. This makes it possible for the Arab students to be both "ethical" and a good friend at the same time. In the U.S. classroom, on the other hand, there were no special seating arrangements, no monitors, no elaborate controls--even take-home tests! What is a self-respecting Arab to do?

The professors complained that Arab students wanted special considerations, were unconcerned about attendance and unwilling to "evaluate" the concepts that were presented. The Arab students replied that they were expected to meet impossible deadlines since they must do everything in their second language, that they missed the paternalistic approach they expected from the professors and didn't feel comfortable asking for help since no one had given them a personal invitation to do so. They felt the professors didn't care if they came to class or not, that they should not let other students take class time with "irrelevant" questions and that they should give more "factual" lectures. The professors were stunned by comments like: "How can we respect teachers who don't demand attention, who sit on the desk, who dress informally and who let students bring coffee to class, or even sleep?"

Another controversial question, and possibly an ethical one, under the subject of classroom practices, is whether it is wise to use a double standard for grading. Many international or minority ethnic students demand it, but others resent the patronizing implication of this. Some students admit to using the tendency of more than a few instructors to give them full credit and good grades just because "they can't be expected to do as well as the others" as a reason to avoid the challenge of greater improvement. A different approach is to give respect, consideration and help to the student with special problems during the term but hold the same intellectual and skill achievement standards for all.

It's sometimes a temptation for international students to substitute excuses for excellence. Instructors who accept these excuses often add to their problems by letting them "get by" and go on to advanced work without meeting more basic requirements. Students studying in a different culture and in a second language have immense difficulties, but they also have high goals and high energy. This author believes it's both unethical and misleading to reward them beyond their achievements. In the long run this could even deprive them of the learning they came to get.

At the risk of attacking the very foundation of most courses in intercultural communication, one last question will be offered for consideration. Are there some students who are not strong enough to tolerate the notion that other lifestyles, patterns of thought or values are equally as acceptable as his or her own? What about those who have a seriously low self-esteem or high anxiety with a strong need for clarity and the firmness of absolutes? Happily, not many are so close to a disturbed state that they cannot survive a threat to their cherished view. Those persons who are would also be highly defensive (necessarily so) and therefore protected from perceiving or accepting what would be too upsetting to them. Still, an instructor should be sensitive to the impact that these ideas can have on anyone, even the emotionally stable, and be ready to help students maintain their identity and self-concept.

Two examples of reactions that students often have to these materials follow. One student writes, "In thinking through perception and cultural differences I am challenged to re-evaluate my ideals and values. At times I almost feel a loss of identity and meaning . . ." A second says, "I believe there is a side-effect of acceptance of the cultural differences among people. Is it not possible that an individual who becomes acutely aware that no one value system has more 'objective' merit than any other will become unable to choose or to act?"[8] This parallels the ideas of Peter Adler regarding the risks that go with being a multicultural person. He includes vulnerability, a confused identity, the loss of a sense of authenticity and the possibility of becoming a gadfly and a dilettante.[9]

To summarize, definitions of what are and what are not ethical behaviors in a classroom will continue to differ, but, whatever they are called, some practices need to be scrutinized. Those mentioned were (1) using teaching maxims as if they are valid for all cultures, (2) disseminating information about cultures without adding cautions to check reliability due to possibilities of change and individual differences, (3) failing to discuss the ethics of misusing cultural information, (4) enforcing one's own behaviors and learning style in an ethnocentric manner, (5) using a double standard of grading, and (6) failing to recognize and/or help students work through an identity-crisis.

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[8]Taken from student papers submitted in a course in "Problems in Intercultural Communication" taught by the author at Portland State University.

[9]Adler, Peter S., "Beyond Cultural Identity: Reflections on Cultural and Multicultural Man," in Samovar and Porter (Ed.) INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: A Reader. 2nd edition, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc. 1976

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